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Multicultural Counseling Issues: Practicing Outside Boundaries of Competence

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Abstract

This article examines issues of practicing outside boundaries of competency with regards to multicultural counseling. Using current research from the fields of counseling and psychology, the significance to the field of counseling, attributes of a multicultural counselor, and training necessary for competent multicultural counseling are addressed. Briefly outlined are the three dimensions of counseling competencies needed to be a culturally skilled counselor as well as consideration of the problems in the field of counselor education. This article concludes with a summary of researchers' suggestions on how to ensure counseling students acquire the appropriate training in developing multicultural competencies to practice ethically.

The subject of multicultural counseling has great significance because of the increasing diversity of the population in the United States shown by immigration rates and higher birth rates among minority racial groups (Arredondo, 1999). According to the 2007 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, immigration has increased 60% in the past ten years from approximately 650,000 to over 1 million and birth rates to minority mothers are up from 18% in 1993 to 45% in 2005 (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, & Park, 2002; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2008). Evidence of the importance of this subject is shown by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards. CACREP standards require graduate programs in counseling to have at least one course in multicultural issues as a prerequisite for graduation with a Master's degree. But within these educational programs where the multicultural course is required, there is a lack of competent faculty to educate future

counselors on difficulty with cross-cultural counseling (Vereen, Hill, & McNeal, 2008). The American Counseling Association's (2005) ethical code in the area of Boundaries of Competence states:

Counselors practice only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, state and national professional credentials, and appropriate professional experience. Counselors gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills pertinent to working with a diverse client population (p. 9).

The main purpose of this article is to identify the competencies needed to be a skilled multicultural counselor. A skilled multicultural counselor is one who is not practicing outside of his or her boundary of competence. To examine this issue, three issues in multicultural counseling and why each is important to the crucial goal of practicing within multicultural competency are addressed. The three issues include: 1)

cultural encapsulation, 2) counselors' awareness of their own and their clients' worldviews and the need for intervention strategies to change, and 3) multicultural educational programs including the under-representation of racial minorities in the field of counseling.

Cultural Encapsulation

The first step to becoming a competent multicultural counselor is understanding that culture is individual. Pedersen (1994) asserts:

Multicultural counseling emphasizes both the ways that persons and groups are different and the ways they are similar at the same time. In that way, two groups or persons can find common ground without sacrificing their unique and special differences. The multiculturally skilled counselor maintains that dual focus at all times (p. 261).

A problem for counselors-in-training is cultural encapsulation. A culturally encapsulated counselor shows signs of tunnel vision that comes from minimal experience outside his or her own culture. A culturally encapsulated counselor fails to evaluate other viewpoints and makes little attempt to accommodate behavior because he or she is trapped in one way of thinking that resists adaptation and rejects alternatives (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007). The danger of a culturally encapsulated counselor ignoring a client's culture is that it may limit the well-being of the client and forces the counselor to covertly or overtly show prejudice or discrimination. This forces the client, who may already approach counseling with hesitation, to ask, "...what makes [this counselor] any different from all the others out there who have oppressed and discriminated against me?" (Pedersen, 1994, p. 20).

Awareness of Worldview

Research shows that counselors also need to be aware of not only their clients' worldviews, but also their own cultural values and biases. A counselor's ability to understand where his or her own assumptions about a specific culture come from will enable him or her to behave in a less culturally encapsulated manner and potentially increase the ability to enter a client's phenomenology (Arredondo, 1999). In describing three dimensions of a culturally competent counselor, Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis (1992) explain the first dimension as:

One who is actively in the process of becoming aware of his or her assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations, and so forth. They understand their own worldviews, how they are a product of their own cultural conditioning, and how it may be reflected in their counseling (p. 73).

As well as recognizing their own values and biases, counselors should be able to freely enter their clients' worldviews. The second dimension described by Sue et al. (1992) is "one who actively attempts to understand the worldview of his or her culturally different client without negative judgments...and with respect and appreciation" (p. 73). Research shows that a culturally skilled counselor should be able to identify his or her emotions when interacting with certain groups, distinguish the difference between those reactions and the reactions of someone who is a member of that group, and recognize how those emotions could influence the effectiveness of a session (Arredondo, 1999).

The third dimension is counselors' ongoing training. The authors declare "a culturally skilled counselor is one who is in

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the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant, and sensitive intervention strategies and skills in working with culturally diverse clients” (Sue et al., 1992, p. 73). A counselor should always seek out new experiences and people that increase exposure to different cultures (Lee, Blando, Mizelle, & Orozco, 2007). If a counselor works with a client of a different culture, he or she may face an obstacle that forces seeking training or other guidance in order to competently counsel that client. When an obstacle is more clearly understood, though, it is less likely to be an obstruction to the counseling process if not eliminated altogether (Pedersen, 1994). A counselor can look to colleagues, continuing education seminars, and possibly even family members of the client for further insight into the culture.

Multicultural Education Programs

Another issue with competencies in multicultural counseling is in the educational setting. As Pedersen (1994) points out, within graduate programs there is an overwhelming number of white students from a European background. But within counselor education and training programs, graduate level faculty, and even among direct-service providers, there is a severe under representation of ethnic and racial minorities. The rise in immigration and increased visibility of minorities is what led to multicultural policies being implemented. However, the lack of minorities to train other ethnicities and races causes an unfixable sequence that leads to a continuation of the same problem; counselors-in-training do not learn the multicultural skills that they need.

Another concern in the arena of education programs and multicultural counseling is the amount of preparation received by counselors-in-training. CACREP standards only require one

graduate level course for students to obtain a Master’s degree. Arredondo (1999) argues that because only one course is required, students are unprepared, which could result in unethical decisions and possibly harmful counseling sessions. Arredondo also states that many counseling professionals consider themselves multiculturally aware but they had no particular set of standards that made them competent. She also suggests that it is difficult to define what cultural competence looks like, but it is easy to spot incompetence.

Applications to Counselor Preparation

Much of the research suggests the need for additional research in the field of multicultural counseling and the skills it takes to reach a level of competency. Several authors conclude that for graduate level study, additional classes should be added to the standards currently in place (Arredondo, 1999; Sue et al., 1992). The competencies identified by Sue et al. (1992), define a multiculturally skilled counselor. These authors argue that the ACA should use these in their ethical standards and CACREP should use the competencies as a guide for credentialing practices and education (Arredondo, 1999; Sue et al., 1992).

Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Sanchez, Locke, Sanchez, and Stadler (1996) provide several ideas for how to become more multiculturally competent. These include enrolling in continuing education courses about ethnic studies, engaging in activities in communities other than one’s own, learning another language that is appropriate to the community, seeking out consultation from professionals in the community, and reading periodicals of a different culture. The authors also suggest speaking with leaders of unfamiliar cultures in the community. They can provide insight into the community and how to work

together cooperatively. Lastly, the authors recommend performing informal research on one's clientele to find any patterns along cultural or racial lines to assist in attaining additional training (Arredondo et al., 1996).

Conclusion

It has been established through immigration and birth rate statistics that multicultural counseling competencies are of tremendous importance. The growing numbers of births to minority mothers and remarkable increase in immigration show the need for counselors to educate themselves on cultures with which they may be unfamiliar. Nowhere is this more important than in the field of counselor education. Counselors-in-training need to not only be educated on the importance of proficiency in multicultural counseling but also in how to achieve the necessary level of competency. Educators should use the three dimensions of a culturally skilled counselor (Sue et al., 1992) as a standard to define multicultural competent counseling. Educators should also have counselors-in-training assess their viewpoints of other cultures and instruct them on ways to "broaden their horizons" to include lesser known cultures. Lastly, educators should encourage counselors-in-training to seek consultation from other professionals when presented with a culture with which they are unfamiliar. Along with educating new counselors, established counselors should assess their own awareness and continually seek to further their own education because becoming a culturally skilled counselor is an active process, ongoing, and never reaches an end point.

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